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Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

WHAT GOD GIVES HE GIVES FOREVER

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"I know that what God gives he gives forever."— Eccl. iii. 14.

The life of man is so full of change and loss, everything that we love and prize is so transient, man himself is so fragile, his possessions so uncertain, nature around him so liable to decay, that a large part of literature seems to resolve itself into one strain of unintermitting elegy. Everything is passing away,— youth, manhood, and age; days, months, and years; powers of mind, powers of body, powers of heart. We stand amid the ruins of the past,— ruins of former races, of past civilizations. Nothing comes so home to the heart as the pathos which commemorates, in song, story, oration, the buried but unforgotten past,— past youth, past love, past joy,—

> "The smiles, the tears
> Of childhood's years,
> The words of love then spoken;
> The eyes which shone now dim and gone,
> The cheerful hearts now broken."

And, what is surprising, it is not age or decay which affects this strain of sentiment, and most enjoys the sad sweetness of recollection; but youth sings these pleasures of memory in preference to those of hope. Every young poet is pretty sure to begin his career with a musical melancholy, mourning over his disappointed hopes, his buried loves and cruelly maltreated expectations, and declaring himself at the age of eighteen to have exhausted life, and to live henceforth only in the past.

We all love to moralize by the side of the brawling brook, and compare it with the flight of time. The night before the attack on Quebec, Gen. Wolfe, as he was rowed in a boat on the St. Lawrence to reconnoitre the enemy, repeated Gray's "Elegy in a Churchyard," then just published, and declared he would rather be the author of that poem than victor in the approaching conflict. So congenial to the human heart is the elegiac sentiment which dwells mournfully on the past and on what it has taken away. But I think, if we examine this feeling, we shall find the pleasure to depend on our perception of the fact that what we prized has not been wholly taken from us; that we retain it by the power of memory, and can commune with it still in recollection. And this I will endeavor to show: that what God has given us nothing ever takes from us.

The beauties of nature which God gives are a permanent possession. Every time we have seen a sunrise or sunset, a magnificent heaped-up mass of clouds, the grand battery from which the red lightning will presently flash and the heavy artillery of heaven will roar; or the ocean rolling on the beach; or the yellow moonlight sparkling on the lake; the immeasurable smile of the sea; the awful dome of night, with its unchanging groups of stars; a little brook rippling over stones; a great mountain carrying on its shoulders pastures, forests, glaciers, fields of snow, into the clouds; every time we have seen through the quivering leaves the deep blue sky over our head, with a little white cloud slowly sailing through circumambient air, or have gathered a single flower, or watched the changing foliage of autumn, or the air filled with drifting snow-flakes,— every time we have seen any of these phenomena, we have been fed with food in our souls. There it is, within the depths of our hearts,— a picture such as no mortal painter ever executed. Prince Doria and Prince Borghese have their picture galleries filled with masterpieces of incalculable value; but has not each one of us in his memory a better picture gallery than theirs?

They must leave theirs behind them when they go, but we take ours everywhere with us. Did Raphael ever paint the evanescent smile we have all seen wandering over an infant's lips, or the dreamy gaze of its eyes? Who could ever catch the divine light of thought, of devotion, of affection, which makes the dullest features radiant with immortal glory? Day by day God pours these treasures into our souls. A chief difference between the joy we take in nature and in other pleasures is that the former lasts, that we do not tire of nature. We enjoy a new house, but tire of it. We have pleasure in a new horse, a new book, a journey to Europe: these things at last all tire. But Nature never betrays the heart that loves her. As age advances, she grows more dear and tender to the soul.

Still more is this the case with beauty of character, the beauty of generous hearts and noble lives, the beauty of divine self-sacrifice, or what the Scripture calls the beauty of holiness. We look back and remember the saints, the generous souls we have known; and their beauty makes the best part of our life. Whatever we have of faith and courage comes largely from them. If we have anything of generosity, it is inspired, or at least fed, by their lives; and they mediate to us God's effulgent goodness.

Thus, too, when God gives Truth, he gives it forever.

Paul says, "If there be knowledge, it shall pass away." Knowledge, in its outward form, passes away; but truth remains. The outward fact is forgotten, but the soul within the fact lasts. Beliefs change, truth remains. I find that I often forget faces and names; but if, twenty years ago, I had an hour's talk with some one, so that I came to form a notion of his character, I remember that forever.

In the history of opinion, we find everything changing. All is flux. The doctrines orthodox to-day were wholly unknown to the early centuries. Perhaps, among all the doctrines of Orthodoxy, none is held more essential than the Atonement.

But during the first thousand years of Christianity the universal doctrine of the Church was that Christ died, not to make atonement to God, but to buy souls out of the hands of the devil. Yet below all this changing tide of opinion there remains something permanent. In this particular doctrine, for example, which now seems so strange, this much at least is true: that the death of the good somehow lifts us out of the power of Satan, somehow purifies our mind and heart. The theory goes: the fact remains. Human creeds and doctrines pass away: the deep human experience of the mind brought face to face with truth remains. Beliefs pass: truth remains. We forget the things behind: we press on to those before. But the things behind, so far as they are realities, go with us always.

Jesus was the greatest and boldest reformer who ever lived. To him the Jewish Temple was nothing, the Jewish Sabbath was nothing: man was the true temple, human good was the only sanction of the Sabbath; every good man belonged to his church; the pure in heart saw God, even though they were heathen or infidel. And yet Jesus, so much of a reformer, so radical in all things, said he came not to destroy, and that no jot or tittle would pass from the law till all was fulfilled. He took up all the truth of the past into the present, and carried it on into the future.

All truth is permanent: it can never pass away. The heart and mind of man are so made that they cling with passionate love to all realized truth, and will hold it, though mixed with ever so much error. So the California miner who has found a nugget of gold holds it firmly, though mixed with earth and dross. He will not let it go till you can separate the earth and alloy, and leave the gold pure. So religious people cling to doctrines a thousand times over proved to be false and absurd, not because they love falsehood, but because they love the truth with which that error is mixed No mere logician can make them let go of the doctrine by any argument or ridicule.

They will not relinquish it till one comes who can see the truth in the error, and give them that truth in a purer form. Then they let the error go. This was what Christ did. He took up into the gospel all that was true in Heathenism and Judaism; and so Paganism fell, and the Jewish Church became the soil of Christianity.

In every real experience, in every real insight, there is something permanent. As we grow older, we grow wiser. Life teaches us all more than study teaches. We forget our opinions; but the faith and hope and love which have grown up in us by all the lessons of Providence, the sight of God and eternal things which we have gained,— these do not pass away.

When God gives us love, he gives it forever. Superficial sympathies, based on accident, on proximity, or common interests of the hour, are very fugitive; but the love which sees what is best in us, and cares for that, is something which cannot pass away. For this is like God's love. He is the God of the living, and loves the living part, the immortal part, of our nature. And so this human love attaches itself to the deepest, noblest, and best thing in us, and often discovers better things in us than we know ourselves, and so helps us most of all.

If we love that which is best in each other, not the fugitive though seducing charm, but the truth and sincerity and earnest feeling in each other's souls, our love to each other helps, and does not hinder; if we vitalize and encourage it by conscience and faith, if we help each other by it nearer to truth, duty, and God, then our love for each other becomes immortal. This love defies accident, absence, change.

Our friend may be much better than we, but that does not separate him from us in any world. Christ was much better than his disciples; but, as long as they loved him and followed him, he loved them. "Whosoever will do the will of God, the same is my brother and sister and mother," said he. Not only he who does it, but who wills to do it, who hungers for it!

If I have ever truly loved any one, that love remains. If he has ever truly loved me, he loves me forever. But by true love I mean love of what is true,—not love of the surface, but of the centre. The heart, wiser than the head, often sees through the surface to the central life, divines what is there, is a prophet telling what is to come. I see in my friend not his outward, external, superficial habit of thought and action; but I see the better nature below, repressed for a time, striving upward. This alone is true friendship: to see what is good deep down in another's soul, and to help that upward into life, and to enable it to conquer the outward frivolity and evil. Such friendship as this cannot die. He who has once known me so knows me always. Accident may separate, circumstances may divide; but we belong to each other evermore.

When God gives us this best of friendship, he gives it forever. People sometimes ask uneasily whether they shall know their friends again after death, and love them again in another life. But what is immortality, if love is not immortal? When Christ was about to go, he comforted his disciples by telling them that he would prepare a place in the higher world, where they would be with him forever,—"that where I am, there ye may be also." If those poor disciples, so ignorant, so weak, those who would all presently forsake him, were still to be with him, we need not fear that our friends will be so far above us that we shall not be able to find them.

Going up to God does not mean going away from those below. Christ's going up was by going down to help the humblest. The best and noblest in this world are those who care the most for those below them. So it will be in the other world, if Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. He and all who belong to him can never lose their love for those who are lowest down and furthest away.

Whoever has helped us to truth, to goodness, to better purposes and better faith, is ours, and will belong to us always.

All the great divine souls of history are ours, our friends and helpers forever. These are the gifts of God, which he will never take away from us.

When a good man goes,—some man who seems necessary and needed by all persons and for all things; some man whose very presence near us gives us confidence, in whose existence in our city we have a guarantee of safety, a man tried in every way, and not found wanting,—we seem to lose more than in any other way. The sense of loss in the community is then very great. When, for example, John Andrew died, one of our city journals said that Massachusetts owed to him that she was able to duplicate her Revolutionary record, and for the second time to lead the nation in the war for freedom. We saw then how much one man could do. With most other men in the chair of State, we should have waited, as the other States waited, not being quite ready; and the great opportunity would have gone by. But here was a man who possessed those rare and seldom united faculties; of the mind able to see what was coming, the heart which could realize the immense importance of the right step, and the courage to take all the responsibility of doing what was needed. When you have those three qualities combined,—intellectual sagacity, moral sense, and determined will,—you have the man who can turn defeat into victory, and seize and hold the fleeting opportunity. And, when God gives such a man, he gives him forever.

Once, when Fred Douglas was setting forth the evils and sins of the land, and showing how hopeless its condition was, Sojourner Truth cried out from the audience, "Frederic, is God dead?" and oratory stood rebuked by faith.

When the young go, those in the midst of a happy life, it seems inexpressibly sad. They have all of life before them, long, happy years opening to them, friendship, homes, everything to love and enjoy. We say, Why are they taken and we left we who have had our day, who have seen all, who have

done our work? And yet there is another view. How happy are those who have grown up innocently, been surrounded by the sweetest affections, have enjoyed the purest experience, and have gone before a single cloud darkened their horizon!

> "His life was bright,— bright without spot it was,
> And cannot cease to be. No ominous hour
> Knocks at his door with tidings of mishap.
> Far off is he, above desire or fear;
> No more submitted to the change and chance
> Of this uncertain planet."

Goodness, real goodness, is so much better than anything else that, if we ever had any of it, we cling to it always. A man who has ever done one generous act values that in his heart, in the midst of a sordid life, more than all its outward successes. A man who has ever really prayed a sincere prayer to God never forgets it. A man who has grown cold, hard, and selfish, looks back to his innocent childhood, remembers how he felt then, remembers his good, honest intentions then, and keeps that memory at the bottom of his heart. If you could take off, one by one, the outer layers and folds of worldly covering, hard selfishness, cold, merciless will, and come to that which is inmost, you would find in the centre of his heart that childish simplicity locked in, covered up, but kept, not thrown away. So in Warwick Castle, by the side of the face of Henry VIII., the bloated, self-indulgent tyrant, hangs a little picture of Henry VIII., an innocent child.

We are never nearer heaven than when standing by the lifeless form of some great and good man or woman. Such souls never die: they only go out of sight. "Dying, behold, they live!" Their souls have passed into the heart of the nation. Death, by some unexplained mystery, transforms them from an individual power among us into a universal presence within us. So Washington has gone into the nation's life, and

we all seem to possess something of Washington. All America was Washingtonized by his life and death.

Once, after long centuries of evil and ignorance, God sent into the world a man who seemed to have escaped all taint of sin, and to have a power which took hold of men's souls with a strange authority. In him were joined light and love, so that he, by this union, inspired life. Dead souls came to life at his word, dead hearts began once more to beat, dead hands to do good work. Those who were in their graves, and contented to be in their graves, heard his voice and came forth. He called himself Son of Man; that is, simply, the Man. The world for the first time had a man in it,—full-grown, full-balanced in head and heart. Sometimes, also, he called himself Son of God; for to him God was not a judge or a king, but a father. What happened? Providence allowed this wonderful soul, this treasure of mankind, to be taken in a year or two, and crucified. Narrow-minded bigots thought him in their way, and God allowed them to kill him. What then? Then it was shown how goodness is immortal and cannot be killed, how death turns into life. What he foresaw and foretold came to pass: "I go away, and come to you." When he went, he came. "He who was with you shall be in you," he said. And so it was. He whom they had before outwardly attended now became their inward inspiration, their holy spirit. His death became the redemption of the world. His soul passed into the life of his disciples, and through them into the life of the age. It leavened the whole lump of human nature. In a few centuries, the grand Roman Empire laid aside its own ancient religion, deposed its pontiffs, abolished its flamens, silenced its augurs, and received this crucified Jew as its master. This man had left nothing in writing, but his fugitive sayings became the oracles of mankind. He had formed no system of belief, but all the venerable philosophies became the servants in his school. He came from the obscurest corner of an obscure

state, to be the light of the world. He taught a year, and died, and is the life of mankind. So it was seen that, when God gave Jesus to the race, he gave him forever.

It is now more than twenty-five years since the purest, noblest, truest, bravest of the then rising generation of this land went to the war. How many were swept away! How much of the best mind, heart, soul of the North seemed to perish, and perish forever, in that cruel struggle! Yet I doubt if any living men exercise such power to-day in the land as those whom we call dead. Each of these noble ones is acting on a circle of men and women whom he has purified, strengthened, elevated to a higher plane of thought and work. Through their minds and hearts, these lost ones are present, active as ever.

When God has once given us to know himself, this greatest of all gifts he gives forever. After years of trivial, outward life, — life empty of any solid satisfaction,— there comes some day of trial, of sorrow, of great and bitter disappointment, some day in which remorse seizes us for our wasted years, or our hardness and indifference toward our friends, or our life empty of any great purpose. Then, perhaps, in the midst of our sense of utter helplessness, we are led to see that God loves us still, that his arms are around us, that he can forgive to the uttermost all our folly; and in that sight we begin a new life. After this, no matter what comes, we have something we can never lose again,— a faith in God's love which nothing can quench, one anchor which holds fast in every storm. "Now abides faith," says Paul, telling how belief changes and opinions pass away. If we have ever once really trusted the Supreme Goodness, that trust will always remain in the depths of the soul,— a seed of hope and love. When God gave that, he gave it forever. I suppose this is what is really meant by the Calvinistic doctrine of "the perseverance of the saints." Not that the saints may not do wrong and go wrong, may not forget their best purpose sometimes, forget God's love sometimes; but

there remains that experience in their hearts always, ready to bring them once again to their Father.

That which brought the prodigal son back to his father was the remembrance of his father's liberality: "How many hired servants of my father have bread enough, and to spare!"

It is an infinite blessing when little children grow up in a church which teaches them that God is, in his essence, not wrath, but love. Then they are saved from the untold misery which those suffer who are taught to believe in God as a stern judge. No matter what comes to them, they have always this faith in a Providence which watches, leads, and cares for them. They have one blessing which they can never lose, which will comfort them in their sorrow, and make death easy. This gift, also, God gives forever.

It is a great thing to have had a happy youth, and God gives to most young people such a fountain of joy within, that youth is almost always happy. It may be in the midst of poverty and hardship, but still it is happy. Its inward light is thrown on all things around. And, in after years of gloom and loneliness and sorrow, this vision of the happy youth, this glory of childhood, inspires hope of a future joy to be. This is the idea of Wordsworth's wonderful ode on "Intimations of Immortality," from recollections of the light and beauty which surrounds childhood. When God has given that, he says, he gives it forever.

> "O joy that in our embers
> Is something that doth live;
> That Nature yet remembers
> What was so fugitive!"

The poets have seen this great truth of the permanence of all the best things, of all gifts truly divine. Shelley says that

> "The one remains: the many change and pass.
> Heaven's light above us shines: earth's shadows fly."

And, of his friend just gone, this poet, who thought himself an atheist, speaks with the hope of a Christian believer: —

"He hath outsoared the shadow of our night,
Envy and calumny and rage and pain;
And that unrest which men miscall delight
Shall touch him not, nor torture him again.
From the contagion of the world's slow stain
He is secure, and now can never mourn
A heart grown old, a head grown gray in vain."

And Wordsworth, in the ode I have before quoted, goes on to speak of

"Those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet the master light of all our seeing,
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal silence,— truths that wake
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavor,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy
Can utterly abolish or destroy."

And Tennyson, too, mourning his lost friend, shows us in all his tender strains of lamentation that he has him still, because he loves him so truly and so entirely: —

"Oh, loved the most, when most I feel
There is a lower and a higher;

"Known and unknown; human, divine;
Sweet human hand and lips and eye;
Dear heavenly friend that *canst not* die,
Mine, mine, forever, ever mine."